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TV REPORTER HELD IN LEBANON IS FREE

Unclear if CNN Correspondent Fled or Was Handed Over

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Special to The New York Times

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Feb. 14 — An American journalist, one of five Americans kidnapped in Lebanon in the last year, gained his freedom today, but it was unclear whether he had been freed or had escaped.

The journalist, Jeremy Levin, the Beirut bureau chief of the Cable News Network, was reported late this afternoon to have arrived at a Syrian Army base in the Bekaa region. He had been held for 11 months. His captors were believed to be Islamic extremists possibly belonging to the shadowy organization known as Islamic Holy War.

[In Washington, the State Department expressed satisfaction that Mr. Levin had gained his freedom. But a top counterterrorism expert said he could "only hope for" the return of the four other Americans still being held, apparently by Islamic extremists.]

To Be Turned Over Today

The official Syrian press agency reported that the United States Ambassador to Syria had been told by Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa that Mr. Levin had managed to escape. Earlier in the day Syria said it won Mr. Levin's release through negotiations. But Mr. Levin was quoted as saying he fled from his captors and walked for two hours.

The American envoy, William L. Eagon Jr., was told that Mr. Levin had

managed to escape from his captors in Lebanon and would be turned over to the ambassador Friday morning at the Foreign Ministry in Damascus.

According to reports, from a variety of sources, Mr. Levin turned up in the middle of Wednesday night at a Syrian military police post on the edge of the city of Baalbeck, a stronghold of Shiite Moslem fundamentalists. He was said to have been seen by a local Lebanese correspondent of Agence France-Presse.

The Islamic Holy War called Western news agencies in Beirut this afternoon to say that it had freed Mr. Levin and hinting of international mediation efforts.

"The truth of the matter is that we released Levin after many approaches by some brotherly and effective sides for which we have all respect and appreciation," the caller said, adding:

"After investigation, we had established that the American correspondent was not involved in any espionage or subversion against Islamic forces."

However, earlier reports on private Christian radio stations and the account Mr. Levin reportedly gave to Agence France-Presse suggested he had escaped.

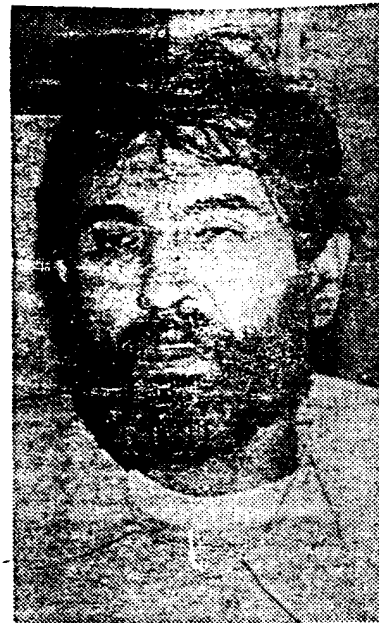
Mr. Levin's freedom came two weeks after another American hostage, the embassy's chief political officer, William Buckley, said in a videotape provided to the European television agency Visnews that he, Mr. Levin and another hostage, the Rev. Benjamin Weir, were well and asked that "our Government take action for our release quickly."

A Role for Algeria?

Unofficial reports circulating here have suggested that Algeria, often a Middle East intermediary in the past, had been involved in mediation efforts.

A key link in any such efforts would have been Syria, which has provided support and material to Shiite groups such as Islamic Holy War and the Party of God.

Western intelligence circles here have tended to the belief that the five Americans may have been held hostage to exchange for some or all of the 17 Shiite militants convicted in Kuwait for the December 1983 suicide truck-bombings of the American and French Embassies there.



Agence France-Presse

Jeremy Levin at a Syrian military post yesterday in Baalbek.

The captives were widely believed to have been held in the Baalbeck region, the stronghold of Islamic Amal, a fundamentalist group within Amal, a mainstream Shiite group led by Hussein Musawi. Other fundamentalist groups are believed to operate from the city, including the Hussein Suicide Commandos, headed by another member of the Musawi family, which western intelligence officials believe carried out the bombing of the American Embassy in September.

Mr. Levin disappeared from West Beirut last March 7. The Agence France-Presse report tonight quoted him as saying that he had been abducted by a single gunman in his 20's.

The French agency reported that Mr. Levin told them he had been held alone and did not know of the other hostages.